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SILENCE AND DEMOCRACY: WOMEN'S LIBERATION, INDEPENDENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

An Open Letter to Prof. Antonio Barbedo de Magalhães and the Independence Movement for East Timor

Dear Prof. Antonio Barbedo,

First, I want to thank you for being so persistent in inviting me to come to the Sixth Symposium on Timor, to speak about women's issues as a *structural* rather than a *marginal* issue in the struggle for independence. Unfortunately, for reasons of security which I have explained to you, I cannot come. However, in light of the fact that 1995 is an important, historic year, marking the 20th anniversary of Indonesian colonialism in East Timor since 1975, the fiftieth anniversary of Indonesian independence from the Dutch in 1945 and the fourtieth anniversary of the Bandung Conference in 1955, I strongly felt that it is no longer a choice, but a responsibility to make a contribution, however small, in the form of questions which I would like to pose to the members of the independence and solidarity movement, in the genuine hope that it may open up a dynamic discussion in your symposium.

I offer these observations and questions as a woman from Southeast Asia, who also grew up in a colony, who has worked clandestinely with the independence movement in the grassroots level for the past five years. I ask these profoundly critical questions out of love and a sincere hope that the independence movement for East Timor will be one of the movements which will be remembered as an "ideal" example in terms of democratic women's participation.

To many idealistic young people all over the world today, East Timorese revolutionaries who march to the streets in proud protest, climbing the walls of the U.S. embassy and subverting the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC), showing extraordinary courage in the face of overwhelming military and political odds, are a symbol of hope and courage. Hope, that the *spirit* (*semangat*) of the Bandung Conference in 1955, the first Asia-Africa conference to celebrate the new independence of Third World peoples and to find an alternative world order outside the Western liberal systems, of the ideals of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, have not been betrayed or forgotten.

Ironically today, the heroic nation who led that conference forty years ago, Indonesia, who was also the leader of the so-called "Non-Aligned Movement" until 1993, has itself become a colonizer, taking away the same freedoms from the East Timorese and from its own people, which it had fought so hard to gain from the Dutch. An old Sumatran woman who saw so much poverty and injustice under the colonial system, and who was promised freedom *from* all these in the post-independence era, painfully asks today: *"Kapan sih, habisnya jaman merdeka?" ("When will independence end?")* It also reminds me of a comment made by a poor black woman in South Africa when the African National Congress took state power:

"Yes, I am happy that we are now independent. But I am also afraid that now we can no longer protest. Now if I protest, they will ask: what are you protesting about?"

East Timorese women in the resistance movement ask the same kinds of questions. Instead of asking the simpler question, "When will independence come?", they ask difficult questions which are not so easily answerable - *"What does independence mean? Independence for whom? Independence from whom? Independence from what? What kind of independence?"* These are questions they ask *repeatedly*.

During informal meetings with Indonesian leaders of the pro-democracy movement in Indonesia, the question was often raised: "What is so *unique* about their independence movement?" I often replied: "The independence movement for East Timor, unlike so many structurally sexist movements in the world, is extraordinarily democratic in terms of women's participation." This coming from the perspective of having participated in another progressive movement in Southeast Asia whose leadership has been exclusively male-dominated and patriarchal, and in which the women's movement has had to struggle so violently in order to gain full political, economic and social rights for women that have been so long denied them.

"The East Timor movement is truly democratic in terms of women's participation." The Indonesian opposition leaders who hear this are surprised, if not envious. One of them, a prominent intellectual in Salatiga, was convinced that I was making all this up to make the East Timorese look more "advanced" than the Indonesians who are so "backward" in their treatment of women. He was incredulous to hear that some of the East Timorese male leaders in Dili conduct workshops on "gender sensitivity", having undergone training from NGOs in a neighboring country, and that most of them, including those in prison, are up-to-date and well-read on the most recent works on women's studies and feminist theory. This progressive Indonesian male was so incredulous that he asked to be taken to these "discussions": *"How could it be possible that there actually exists a movement in which women have full equality with men, when the history of modern movements for independence have shown otherwise?"*

On Democracy. The Indonesian government's rhetoric on *democracy* is that it is "not good" (*"tidak beres"*), that it is a "foreign concept" (*"asing"*), that it is "too modern" and difficult to apply to Indonesia which is more used (*terbiasa*) to feudalism (*"cara feodal"*), to the hierarchical structure of master and slave. Therefore it is particularly ironic that the opposition movement, a "pro-democracy movement" which claims to represent democratic ideals, behaves in an *undemocratic* manner by *silencing women*. Let me give you some examples.

An Indonesian woman friend, who has been working in the opposition movement since the 1970s and in particular with poor women labourers in urban areas, told me about how outrageously sexist the "most progressive male leaders" can be. In the midst of the massive labour protests in 1993-94, surrounding the case of Marsinah, the young factory worker and labour union leader, who was brutally murdered by the military, thousands of women workers decided to draft a petition to President Suharto and military authorities making

powerful demands about workers rights. They assembled at the building of "the most progressive" human rights oganization in Indonesia (*Lembaga Bantuan Hukum* or Indonesian Legal Aid Institute) where they thought they would get the most support. When asked what the protest was all about, the women replied, "We want to *attract attention* about workers rights" ("*mau menarik perhatian*"). To which, one of the male leaders of this progressive organization jokingly replied, *"Kalau mau menarik perhatian, buka baju saja."* (*"If you want to attract attention, all you have to do is take off your clothes."*)

The women didn't laugh. It wasn't funny, in light of Marsinah's brutal murder, she was raped with such violence that her pubic bone was crushed. Thousands upon thousands of women raped. It is the same women, who, whenever they raise questions about *women's rights as workers rights and as human rights*, are often told to shut-up, by patronizing male leaders who often say, *"Mempersempit issue saja."* (*"You are just narrowing the issues."*) My friend suggests: *"Next time they talk to you about the rights of workers and peasants, raise your hand and ask politely - Which worker?, Which peasant? - Men or Women?"*

Another friend, a man, who works for an international human rights organization and has been working very devotedly on East Timor and Indonesia for the past six years, and knows a great deal about the people in the pro-democracy movement in Indonesia, made a very revealing comment on division of labour and gender relations in grassroots-level organizing. He commented, "When I would go into these radical NGOs, I am usually received by a group of ten to fifteen men, usually from the ages of 20-30, hanging around the office. We talk for hours and hours about human rights, but when I ask them for details, they actually don't know what's going on and don't remember how many soldiers were there or how many were arrested. It turns out that the people who *do* know are the women, who are often in the back of the office. It is they who actually know and remember everything."

The public face of the leadership of the pro-democracy movement in Indonesia is monolithically male. An exclusively male leadership *represents* the movement. They have a few selected female tokens whom they *allow* to speak, so that they can say, "Oh, but there's Nursyahbani, there's Megawati, etc." I wish that one could say that the East Timorese independence movement is different, but unfortunately, it is the same situation.

When confronted with this problem, East Timorese male leaders of the independence movement both in East Timor and abroad, often listen in a very sensitive manner and respond: "Women *are* very active in the resistance movement. Antonia (I've changed the real names) was here, she cooked and brought the food. Maria and all these other women are serving the guests. Cristina has been driving all the participants around." My question, and the question which so many East Timorese women in the clandestine movement ask is: Is this the only kind of role which women can have in the political movement - a marginal, supportive role as "housekeepers", as "wives to the revolution", as secretaries and servants? Why do they not have the same variety of options and choices of roles as men, as public speakers, as active participants who actually have an important voice and contribution to make? Is this the example you can give us of an appreciation for "democracy"?

I think that it would be a mistake to assume that the mobilisation of women in times of "abnormal conditions", especially when they are simply subjected to a "supporting role" to that of the "real actors", necessarily leads to a re-definition of women's roles in terms of greater equality with men. When asked by the men why she persistently refuses to participate in the male-dominated official meetings of RENETIL, one of the most courageous and eloquent East Timorese women in the clandestine movement cynically replied: "I'll start participating in your meetings when you start cooking in the kitchen. Until then, you can have your movement. Men who give speeches in public about democracy, human rights and equality but do not practice it are frauds. Grand ideals like democracy, revolution, independence -- all of these are empty if we do not practice them amongst ourselves."

The truth is, the East Timorese men I have interviewed, when confronted with this issues are as outraged as the women regarding this persistent lack, if not complete absence, of *women's democratic participation*. To the extent, that one of the male leaders, at a cultural and political campaign in Portugal in which there was not a single East Timorese woman present, inspite of the encouragement for women to participate, was so profoundly grieved that he privately threatened to abandon the movement altogether if this kind of exclusionary operation happened again.

But it is not a question of numbers and of getting so many more women involved. The silencing of women is a *structural* problem. Including a few token women is not enough. What needs to be reflected upon is the social attitudes which accounts for this *absence* of women. What they ask for is not to add even more women, but to *recognize* and *give credit for the work of the women* who are already there; women who do all the dirty work who never get credit for anything; they sit so silently and patiently, and as far as the movement is concerned, they are invisible. And yet the movement heavily depends on their work.

What these women are asking for is not just formal equality or political rights. What they are asking for is a *change*, a revolution in the structures of social relations. It is a question of changing deeply-rooted patriarchal attitudes among men *and* women, not just among East Timorese, but among all of us, myself included.

Some of the most patronizing and sexist people in the movement are women, in particular white women, who are so confident of their "radical politics" that they do not stop to question their condescending attitudes towards East Timorese and poor Third World women in general. An East Timorese woman told me about a humiliating experience in which an Australian journalist requested an interview with her and her husband, both of whom have played an important role in the independence movement. This young East Timorese woman was so excited to finally be able to tell her story, that she got all dressed-up for the interview. The Australian woman interviewed her husband for three hours, and at the end, apologized that she was running out of time, and wanted to know about the young woman's experiences in *three minutes*! After several treatments similar to this, this young woman has refused to participate in any interviews or activities organized by the movement. She asks cynically, "What for? What is the point?"

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Another example is a European feminist who told me about her solidarity work with the East Timorese, how much she understands that "it is the women who suffer the most", that it is the women who are really doing all the dirty work, but that she had no time to talk to this women because her own work in the international arena "representing them" is so pressing and so much more important. I found this treatment of women's issues as tangential to the "larger political scene", the "larger international scene" so outrageously sexist and not so different from the attitude of the domineering Indonesian men who tell women to *shut-up* when they raise questions about women's equality: that they are "just narrowing the issues". Who elected her to *represent* them?

"They cannot represent themselves. They must be represented."

The heart would have to cry out for justice! Why isn't there more financial support for East Timorese women, in East Timor and in the refugee communities abroad to have access to education which will enable them to speak for themselves? Will this be the kind of nationalist movement which places so much more importance on the role of the male leaders and of the privileged elite who have access to higher education and European education in particular, while marginalizing and occluding the role of poor women, especially those who are too militant and those who cannot speak more politely in Portuguese and English?

Silencing women in a "pro-democracy" and "independence" movement is inexcusable and impermissible. It may have been excusable in the 1940s and 1950s when the independence movements in the Third World were still groping around for models, many of whom decided that the nationalist struggle had to have primacy over everything else, postponing women's struggle for equality until after independence has been achieved. But things have changed radically since the 1950s. We have seen and learned from so many examples of social movements where women's struggle does not have to be marginal or subordinated, but can go alongside the struggle for independence, *enriching* it in a very dynamic and creative way, such as the example of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and the independence movement for Eritrea. These are two movements where women played and important and crucial role, fighting alongside men, and where a women's movement radically altered the terms of discourse in the independence movement, by raising women's issues as a structural rather than a marginal issue. Nelson Mandela never makes a speech without talking about women's equality. But the question is: will speeches, summits and conferences about "women's equality" such as those in Cairo and Beijing be put into practice?

I would like to pose the following questions for discussion:

1. What kind of model will the independence movement for East Timor offer to the world? The experiences of women in countries that have undergone a comparable independence struggle in this respect is instructive. Will East Timor choose to be like the South African and Eritrean models, or will it be more like the Algerian model? Algerian women played an important role in the struggle for independence, and yet after independence from France was achieved in 1962, they were forced back into their traditional subordinate roles. The post-

independence state relegated women's social liberation to the backburner, and conventional patriarchal attitudes regained the upper hand, as we witness today in the violent suppression of women by Islamic fundamentalists.

In East Timor, women have been drawn into political activities in which they had previously been barred by custom and tradition. In effect, it is the "abnormal" conditions of war and colonization which have propelled them into a more active role in the independence movement. But has this development really led to more equality between men and women?

Kumari Jayawardena, a Sri Lankan scholar and feminist, writes that in countries engaged in a nationalist struggle, the fight has often been for independence only, and has generally not aspired to create a different society, one in which both class and gender inequalities would be removed. It is also true that, in general, women's movements have tended to postpone the questioning of patriarchal social structures and to give priority to the nationalist struggle.

Will the East Timorese movement merely be a nationalist movement like all the others in the past or will it be a struggle for independence in which all peoples, including women, will have full social, political and economic independence? Will it be a movement which will not only struggle for women's equality and independence, but will *ensure* that this equality will continue, even under "normal" conditions?

2. How do we define "democracy", "freedom", "independence"? How do we conceptualize independence" beyond the formal language of "rights"? What is the meaning of "independence"? (*"Apakah artinya Revolusi?"*) The kind of independence which Indonesia gained -- in which poor women like the Sumatran woman I quoted above did not benefit but found themselves under new forms of subordination. The kind of independence in which Mahasweta Devi, an inspiring woman writer and activist who has devoted her life struggling for India's independence from British rule, and speaking against injustice against tribals and untouchables, describes as one in which *"They have not been a part. Yet they have paid the price."*

Will it be like the Indonesian revolution in which the ideals of the revolution were prostituted by the "heroes" of the revolution itself?

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, one of the most outspoken critics of the Indonesian government and to my mind, the most brilliant writer in Southeast Asia today, who is under house arrest and whose works are banned, portrays in a powerful and moving way, this failed independence and its maimed heroes, in his collection of short stories *Tjerita dari Djakarta (Stories from Jakarta)*. In these stories, he presents characters in the newly independent Indonesia who "ought" (*"seharusnya"*) to be happy, who ought to have genuine, loving relationships, who ought to have food to eat, who ought to have a roof over their heads. But it turns out that what exists in independent Indonesia is *failure ("keguguran")*: it turns out that post-independence Indonesia is not at all beautiful nor romantic: there is no genuine love, husband and wife hate each other and want each other dead, the women often scream with madness,

human beings are deeply afflicted with political amnesia -- a society in which it is no longer possible to differentiate human beings from monkeys (*"tidak bisa dibedakan lagi dengan monyet"*).

In Pramoedya's portrayal of Indonesian independence, we find women who are used by the state as symbols of nationalist heroism, but the reality is that women themselves are powerless, they do not have the right to speak, they do not have the right to represent themselves in this new Republic, they do not have the right to become members of parliament or to participate in the drafting of the constitution. After independence they ask: "*Apakah artinya Revolusi?*" What is the meaning of Revolution? When will independence end?

3. What kind of state do you want after independence? Is it the kind of state which will ensure that there will be true equal rights for women? Will the state intervene to implement policies in health care, population programs, child care, equal opportunity for education and jobs to ensure that poor women will have the same access to rights and privileges as men and elite women?

Or are these questions which should be postponed until independence is achieved?

Thank you for your patience. To build a truly democratic independent movement, as Mahasweta Devi writes, "you must love beyond reason for a long time." I appeal to the basic human instinct that must be alive in each and every one of you, to arouse your sense of justice, of decency and of compassion.

If what I've said merely falls on deaf ears, then I shall be truly sorry.

Yours sincerely,

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